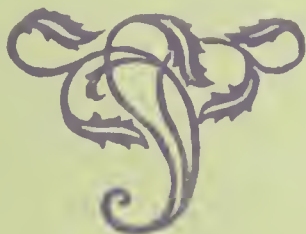


# HOBEANA

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UMVOTI MISSION

AS I stand on the veranda of the missionary's house in Umvoti, and look far away across the river to the hills beyond, I can see a small, bright spot gleaming out in the vivid green of the foliage. It is the roof of one of my out-station schoolhouses. As I recall to-day the little building with its many associations, there is one face and figure that stand out from the dusky crowd. Some years ago, as I was visiting this school one day, I saw a bright-faced, bright-eyed, intelligent-looking old man about seventy years of age,—one whom we might call a splendid old heathen. His name was Hobeana. I was surprised to see him there, and as soon as I had an opportunity I said to him, "Why, Hobeana, how do you happen to be here?"

"O," he said, "I am coming to church."

This was such an unusual thing for one of his age and position to do, I wondered what his motives were, and asked, "What are you coming to church for?"

"I want to find out what Christianity is."

"But why do you wish to find out what Christianity is?"

"I've had a dream."

"A dream? What did you dream?"

"I dreamed that I must come down here and find out what Christianity is. I didn't

wish to do anything slyly, so I called all the chief people together, and said, 'I am going down there to find out about Christianity.'"

"What did they say?"

"O, they consented, and so I've come."

"Well, what have you found out about Christianity?"

"I haven't found out, but I'm going to. I come to every service, rain or shine, and I'm coming right along."

He kept his word, and did come to every service. A few months from that time I saw Hobeana one day, and I said to him, "Well, Hobeana, have you found out what Christianity is?"

"No; but I'm going to," he answered.

Then followed quite a long conversation. He talked about his dream, some of the innumerable superstitions of his people, and a little of what he had learned in the church. He mixed it all up together, and I wondered if there could be any place in his mind for the real light; but I believe God was speaking to him, although the light was like a leaf in the air, seeming to have no place to rest.

Some weeks later I again saw Hobeana, and he had on his first garment. He was sitting on a bench, his elbows were akimbo, and he did not quite know what to do with his hands and feet. Often when the natives first go into a civilized house, they do not understand about the furniture and other

things they see. They do not dare trust themselves to the chairs, for fear they will fall; so when they first sit on a bench they are not quite sure of the foundations.

As soon as Hobeana saw me, he said, "You see I'm going to be a Christian, Inkosazana."

"In what way are you going to be a Christian?" I asked.

"Why, don't you see I'm dressing now; I'm going to have clothes. I'm like other people who wish to be Christians."

"O no, Hobeana; clothes do not make you a Christian," I answered. "God will hear you when you pray to him, and will help you in your native costume just as well as he will if you have this garment on. You want some clothing for the heart. I can't make you understand all this, but God can. He can make you understand way down here;" and I placed my hand on my heart as I spoke; but Hobeana's face was sad—he couldn't understand me.

A few months passed by, and when I saw Hobeana again, he had on a second garment. He was sitting up straight and dignified on the bench. His elbows were down by his body. He said, "Inkosazana, now you see I am going to be a Christian."

"How are you going to be a Christian?" I asked, as before.

"Why, don't you see I'm dressed now."

“O, but Hobeana, still you want a garment for the heart, away down here,” again touching my heart.

Hobeana put his hand to his mouth in native fashion, and shook his head slowly and silently. He couldn't understand; he was perplexed, distressed, to find that these things made him no better Christian. He must have clothing for his heart; what was this clothing, and how was he to get it?

His next step was to have his ring cut from his head. A Zulu, when old enough to become a soldier, has a ring, made of some glutinous substance, fastened on the top of his head. He thinks a great deal of this ring. To him it is like a diploma to a young man when he comes out of college. He wears it all his life. It was this ring that Hobeana had cut off. I said, “Hobeana, why have you had this ring cut from your head? You thought so much of it and it looked so nicely.”

“O,” he said, “I am going to be a Christian.”

Again I had to tell him, “Even this won't help you any to be a Christian. If you wish to have it cut off, that is all well enough; if you want to wear a hat, you can wear it better with this off than on, but it won't make you any the better Christian.”

Again Hobeana was greatly perplexed and distressed. He said, “I am truly going to be

a Christian." Again he talked about his dream and what he heard in church, and by this time he had really learned a great many Bible truths. He was still very regular at service, and we felt that he was improving,—that the real truth was taking root in his heart.

It may have been two years later that I met Hobeana dressed in a fine suit of broadcloth clothes. They were very nice. His linen and all parts of the suit were quite perfect. I said, "Hobeana, where did you get this splendid suit of clothes and the linen?"

"O, my daughter went down to the station and learned to wash and iron, and she takes care of my clothes, and brushes them, and folds them, and puts them in a box, and I shall only wear them when I go to church and when I go down to see you. I see other people who are Christians wear nicer clothes on Sunday than on any other day." Then he straightened up and said, "Now, Inkosazana, I am a Christian."

Now, friends, don't you see the same human nature in Africa as in America? People go to church, put on their best clothes, sit comfortably back in their seat, find the right place in the hymn-book, and say, like Hobeana, "I am a Christian." Sometimes this very thing is like an armor,—harder to penetrate than real heathenism. We didn't want Hobeana to have this armor; and, painful as it was,



again I had to tell him that all these things didn't make him a Christian. Oh, how distressed he looked! "But," said he, "I look just like other people who go to church, don't you see?" and he smoothed down the broadcloth. More and more we felt convinced, however, that the real truth was dawning in his heart, and one day he said to me, "Inkosazana, we have prayed at our kraal,—we have had prayers."

"How can you have prayers?" I asked. "Do you know how to read? And your sons and grandsons,—what do they say about it? Will they come in to prayers in your kraal?"

The feeling of filial respect is very strong among the Zulus, and immemorial custom makes it still stronger. Hobeana seemed astonished that I should ask whether his grown-up sons were respectful. "Oh," he said, "they come in, unless they can make an excuse to stay away, and they sit still and they listen, but yet they don't want to be Christians. I repeat something that I have heard in church. And I have learned the Lord's Prayer; and, Inkosazana, I've learned, too, some words of my own to say to the Lord."

So, month by month, Hobeana improved, always coming to every service, till at last we felt that he had the clothing for his heart that was so necessary. He applied for church-membership, but there were difficulties to be overcome. In the first place, Hobeana had

three wives. I shall never forget the day when he came to talk this matter over with me. We knew it was coming. I said to him: "Hobeana, I have advised you about many things, but now I have no advice to give you; only God can help you. These wives are the mothers of your children; you took them in heathenism,—it is your duty now as a Christian to provide for them, and if separated, to be separated in a Christian way; only God can help you, and we must both be very earnest in asking him to guide you."

By this time Hobeana had learned to take the truths of the Bible as direct messages from God to himself. He often said, "They are like a letter from God to me." He took them to his heart and believed them, and prayed, believing that God would hear and answer him. And God did.

Strange as it may seem, the answer came through heathen customs.

There is a Zulu custom that when a man is first engaged, he gives a certain number of cattle to the father of his betrothed. They are not married young; engagements often continue for several years, and the rest of the cattle are given at the time of the final marriage ceremony. All this time the girl is at her father's kraal. We had supposed that Hobeana had really taken his youngest wife to his kraal,—that the final ceremony had been performed; but we found that she was

still living with her father. Without wishing to help Hobeana to be a Christian,—in fact, we think it was because he was a Christian,—she was determined the engagement should be broken. It was a very unusual thing to break an engagement, and it is almost impossible for a heathen woman to separate from her husband and be married again; but the girl urged her heathen father until at last he consented to return the cattle to Hobeana. The engagement was broken, and Hobeana was separated from his young wife; but there were two still remaining. Another Zulu custom is, that when a woman has a grown-up son who is married, and wishes his mother to come and live with him, heathen law allows her to do this, but not marry again. One of Hobeana's wives had a grown-up son, who was opposed to his father's becoming a Christian, but who very much wished to have his mother to come and live with him. She did so, and thus all was pleasantly arranged. Hobeana was very happy in the thought that it had all been done without any unpleasantness; that he was free to live with his first and best-loved wife. Again he applied for church-membership, but there was another difficulty.

Some people in America may think the action of the mission of which I am to speak was very narrow, but if they knew all the difficulties we had to contend with, they

would modify their opinions, I am sure. There is a native beer, made from corn. of which the Zulus are all very fond; and among the social customs, in which they take great delight, are the large beer drinks, sometimes composed of three or four hundred people. All that is vile, and much that hinders the Christian work, goes on at these beer drinks. Aside from other evils, the beer itself injures them physically, making them stupid and indolent. Our missionaries have done all they could to influence our Christian people to give it up; but the Zulus are born lawyers, and they can plead their cases well, bringing up strong arguments in favor of their beer. They say: "It is our food; we have not the variety of food that white people have, and then our beer does not intoxicate like the white man's rum and brandy." Many of our best people were determined not to be convinced that they should give it up. Ten years ago our mission held a meeting of several days to try and talk over this question. In many respects it was a very trying meeting. All of our native pastors, the chief native Christians, and missionaries came together. After much talk and prayer the people were induced to take a vote that in future whoever came into our churches should give up the native beer. I felt almost sorry this rule was made. I feared it would tear our churches in pieces. and for a year we did not have the

communion at our church. It was like a great wave of trouble, annoyance, and anxiety. But it passed, and there came a wave of blessing such as we had never known before. I sometimes felt that we could only stand and see what the Lord would do. We had almost grown to feel that we could not have a revival in our churches; but it began first in Umvoti, and went through our whole mission, and the last five years or more have been like a steady and constant revival. In a letter I received from dear Mrs. Tyler, written just before she went to heaven, she said: "This last year has been the most blessed of our mission, and we feel we owe so much to the temperance movement, and the stand we took as a mission in regard to that and other heathen customs which were creeping into the church."

This rule was made before Hobeana applied for church-membership. He was an old man, seventy years old or more, when he wished first to become a Christian. He had never been a drunkard; he did not go to large beer drinks; but he felt he could not give up his beer. I shall never forget one of our preparatory lectures, when he stood in all his native dignity and pleaded his case. He said: "I'm old; my teeth are gone; I have not a variety of food; I walk a long way to go to church; I have never been intoxicated; I do not wish to go to beer drinks; I have given up my

neathen customs; I have given up my ring; I have given up my wives,—but how can I give up this little cup of beer that I need?’ (*Ipikile encane engaka.*)

Our hearts had grown very tender toward Hobeana. I wished so much he could have come into the church before this rule was made, but it had been made. I knew it was a great blessing to many of our churches, and I saw no way but that Hobeana must suffer for the good of others. The missionary asked Hobeana to reconsider, and wait until the next communion. The next communion came. Hobeana had seen many who seemed to have made this a test question, and he had come fortified with new arguments. We knew that he was a Christian; we felt that he had sacrificed much, and that really he could not see how he was to glorify God by giving up his beer. “No,” he said; “I will never give up my beer.”

The missionary’s heart yearned over him, and he said to the members of the church: ‘It may be that we are asking too much. We know that Hobeana is a Christian, and that he seems unable to understand the necessity for this sacrifice. If we make an exception, and allow him to come into the church, we here will all understand it, and perhaps our other church-members will. We will vote upon it; and if you, as a church, decide that he can come in, I shall say nothing more against it.’

The church voted to admit Hobeana to church-membership, and the next Sunday Hobeana came to his first communion.

Two or three weeks after that I was standing on the veranda. I saw Hobeana coming, resplendent in his broadcloth suit. As he came near me he took hold of the side of his coat, and said, "Inkosazana."

"Well, what is it, Hobeana?"

"Inkosazana, I want that little blue ribbon put right here in my buttonhole."

"What do you want of the blue ribbon? You say you can't give up your native beer."

"Oh!" he said, "Inkosazana, to think that I am a child of God; that I have come to the table of the Lord, and can't give up a little thing for Christ's sake,—can't give it up for him who has done so much for me! I said that my teeth were gone, and that I couldn't get on without my beer; but I'm old, and I can't get on without my sleep, and I can't sleep nights when I think that I can't do this thing. Can't give up a thing that I love when He has done so much for me! Now, I've tried to give it up, and for two or three days I have not touched a bit of beer;" and he straightened up, and said: "I've walked all the way, seven miles, down here, and I'm not hungry, and I'm not over-tired. It was just an excuse. If I haven't teeth, there are other things that I can eat. Don't you see how well I am, and yet I haven't had a bit of

beer for several days; I can do without it. Now get the ribbon, quick. I want it in this buttonhole, so that all the world may know that Hobeana can do this thing for Christ's sake."

That was a year before I came to America. I often saw Hobeana, and I would say to him sometimes: "Well, Hobeana, what about the beer? When you get home sometimes and are tired, and you smell it, and you see great pots of it, don't you wish you could have some?"

"Oh, no!" he said. "Sometimes I go and I look at it, and I smell it, and I say: 'Hobeana, now don't you wish you had some? It is nice; it would taste nicely, smells nicely,' and I say, '*No*; if it is nice, I am glad I can give up nice things—a thing that I love—to Him who has done so much for me.' No, no, Inkosazana; a thing that I love for His sake."

Only three weeks ago I had a letter from one of our native Christians, and he said, "Hobeana is, as usual, growing more and more to know and to love the Lora."



